

Writing Handout L-6: The Literary Present

Write about literature in the present tense unless you are using a direct quote or writing about actual events that happened in the past (see Example 1).

When you refer to the events in a story (as in a plot summary), you should use "the literary present" tense. Write as if the events in the literary work are happening now.

Example 1

Ernest Hemingway wrote *The Old Man and the Sea* during the early 1950's when he lived in Cuba. In the story, Hemingway explains that the old fisherman "no longer dreamed of storms, nor of women, nor of great occurrences, nor of great fish, nor fights, nor contests of strength, nor of his wife. He only dreamed of places now and of the lions on the beach."

Here, "wrote" and "lived" are in the past tense because they refer to actual events that occurred in the past; "dreamed" is left in the past tense since it is a direct quote. However, "explains" appears in a statement about Hemingway's writing, so it is in the present tense.

To avoid a confusing shift in tense, a possible revision could read as follows:

In the story, Hemingway explains that the old fisherman dreams no more "of storms, nor of women, nor of great occurrences, nor of great fish, nor fights, nor contests of strength, nor of his wife." He dreams only "of places now and of the lions on the beach."

Example 2

Past (incorrect): Fearful of the battle that he heard in the distance, Robert Jordan awoke and held Maria tightly, "as though to expel the fear from his troubled soul."

Literary Present (correct): Hearing the distant battle and becoming fearful, Robert Jordan awakes and holds Maria tightly, "as though to expel the fear from his troubled soul."

Summary

When you read a literary work, consider the events as though they are currently happening; when you write your essay about a literary work, think of the work as if you are currently speaking to the writer. See Example 3 as a sample of a writer using the literary present for an analysis of a short story.

Example 3

Adapted from “An Explication of a Passage in ‘The Tell-Tale Heart’ ” by Dr. Charles Croghan, Indian River State College English Department.

Edgar Allen Poe’s “The Tell-Tale Heart” **opens** with a nameless, first-person narrator telling the story of how he **murdered*** an old man. The narrator **explains** that his reason for telling the tale **is** to prove that he **is** not insane. Poe **indicates** in the first lines of the story that the narrator **is** insane; however, the madness **is revealed** only when the reader **comes** to the speaker’s account of his preparations for the murder.

As the narrator **details** his preparations for the murder, the meticulous planning **provides** the reader with evidence of insanity. One example **is** the speaker’s exact schedule for spying: “every night at midnight.” All of the careful preparations that the speaker **explains** in detail to prove his sanity **serve** only to convince the reader that he **is** mad.

In still another of his assumptions, the speaker **shows** that he **is** madly “logical” or operating on the logic of a dream. There **seems** to be a dream-like relationship between his dark lantern “all **closed, closed,*** so that no light **shone*** out,” and the sleeping victim. When the mad man **opens** his lantern so that it **emits** a single ray, he **is hoping** that the old man’s head **will be open,*** too.

By **taking** such great pains and **practicing** this nightly ritual, the speaker **demonstrates** that what he **perceives** as evidence of his sanity **is** actually just the opposite. His logic and words **prove** self-defeating.

***Note:** Logic dictates use of past or future tenses in some situations, especially in quotes.